
H-France Review Vol. 18 (August 2018), No. 175

Huw Grange, *Saints and Monsters in Medieval French and Occitan Literature: Sublime and Abject Bodies*. Modern Humanities Research Association; Research Monographs in French Studies 53. Cambridge: Legenda, 2017. ix + 129 pp. Figure and notes. £75, \$99, €85 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-781884-89-8.

Review by Brian J. Reilly, Fordham University.

This well-crafted book captures the goodwill of its audience from page one. Its author, Huw Grange, makes a simple inversion that rights a chronological wrong: saints are not the comic-book superheroes of the Middle Ages; rather today's superheroes continue in the medieval saints' tradition of extraordinary corporality. *Saints and Monsters* looks at saints' bodies along an expanded spectrum, from the narrative body of flesh and blood to the textual body in *mouvance* across manuscripts, and from the body of the text on parchment to the body of its receptive communities ("a body *qua* body of bodies" [p. 6]). The goodwill of the reader is maintained throughout, even if challenged by the other aim of this book: "to draw on medieval literature to probe and go beyond our present understanding of the 'sublime' and the 'abject'" (p. 9). These terms, *sublime* and *abject*, come from Lacanian psychoanalysis, as filtered through the work of Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek, which has become perhaps *the* dominant discourse in Old French and Occitan studies.[1] Grange's rich readings of medieval saints' lives are performed within this discourse, but Grange uses those texts to talk back to theory and refine our understanding of its key terms. For the uninitiated, Grange almost always gives ample illustration to follow along. *Saints and Monsters* successfully opens itself up to readers across fields, whether to medievalists interested in saints or corporality or to scholars in any field who look at bodies through a psychoanalytic lens.

Saints and Monsters comprises four chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. Each part gives a reading of at least one saint's many bodies: Eulalia; Margaret of Antioch; George of Cappadocia; Honorat of Hungary; Enimia of France; and Syrus. The selection is restrained but thematic, the latter five all having encounters with dragons, which are "apt beasts for considering sublime and abject relations" (p. 9). Both saints and dragons have bodies that trouble binary categories, like body/soul, literal/symbolic, and abject/sublime. For those five saints and their doubles, Grange explores how their multiple bodies bring these categories to crisis.

A medieval saint has many bodies in part because his or her body gets represented differently in different manuscripts, which themselves have a material, corporeal existence. By comparing a saint's different textual bodies across manuscripts, philologists are in a unique position to see how changes to one body produce changes in the others. And the recognition of such textual mobility, of such *mouvance*, Grange claims, is "an unlikely ally" of "non-essentialism," allowing us to see bodies, whether sublime or abject, as "culturally contingent" "discursive productions" (p. 9).

In the introduction, "Holy Comic Books," Grange begins at the beginning of Old French literature with the *Sequence of St Eulalia*. This well-known text illustrates Grange's procedure of comparing a saint's bodies across corpora. Here, the ninth-century canonical text is supplemented by an Occitan text at more than half a millennium's remove. Grange demonstrates that the continuity of Eulalia's

hagiographical tradition—despite her omission from the *Legenda aurea*—believes that “her bodies and texts signified differently to different audiences” (p. 3). The change in textual corpus entails changes to other bodies: Eulalia’s narrative body, for example, becomes both flame-retardant *and* insensible to pain. Eulalia thus allows Grange to introduce the concept of the sublime body, largely inspired by an article by Sarah Kay titled “The Sublime Body of the Martyr.”^[2] Saints’ bodies “appear to undergo plenty of real deaths (by all natural laws) while remaining symbolically alive and well” (p. 6). Such sublime bodies, together with “uncannily similar” (p. 9) abject bodies, occupy the mirror space of the Lacanian *zone entre-deux-morts*. It is this zone that gets a thorough mapping in the book’s main chapters.

Chapter one, “St Margaret of Antioch and her Sublime/Abject Bodies,” uses forty of the saint’s extant textual bodies to “rebut^[1] some of the received ideas about Margaret and her medieval cult” (p. 18). Our scholarly “misremembering” of Margaret entails thinking that she is a saint fit only for the credulous or that she is the patron saint of childbirth only ironically given her virginity and being “birthed” by a dragon rather than birthing a child. Rather, Margaret’s hagiographers gave sophisticated responses to the “fuzzy boundaries” of bodily binaries, contesting in their own idioms the relation between the sublime and the abject (p. 18). How, for example, does an abject body become sublime? Can a saint’s self-abjection effect sublimation? From Kay, Grange takes Wace’s version to demonstrate the “perfect match” of martyr and martyrizer (p. 16), who both want her torture and death. Another version, however, has Margaret showing some interest in having her body heal between tortures, indicating that she has not totally symbolized her body (p. 16). In this version, Margaret’s body has “more in common with the Kristevan abject than with the Žižekian sublime” (p. 16). Two other versions instead treat her body “as always already sublime” (p. 21), immune to pain from the start. Grange thereby builds upon Kay’s reading of Wace’s Margaret, expanding the body of texts to demonstrate the cultural and historical contingency of the saint’s bodies that Kay had herself argued for.

This question of how and when a saint’s abject body becomes sublime implicates a constellation of other terms: agency, gender, and maternity. Grange confronts them through a paradox of psychoanalytic subjectivity: “[O]ne can be *made* abject, but the condition of *being* abject shouldn’t, strictly speaking, be possible” (p. 20). In the torturing of saints, for example, the problem of agency asks: who is abjectifying their bodies? An Occitan verse version from Florence is shown to participate in this question by having Margaret curse her pagan foe if he does not torture and kill her. Margaret’s corporeal abjection is thus willed to achieve sublimation. But this use of will raises the issue of gender. Grange rejects readings of Margaret’s lives that see her as masculinized. Instead, her actions constitute a point-by-point response to the punishment of Eve in Genesis 3 (p. 17). Yet some texts still insist on the gender of Margaret’s sublime body: “It is by sticking resolutely to her gender, when ... torture ... should erase all markers of her femininity, that she ends up transgressing her gender. The sublime body is gendered and transcends its gender simultaneously” (p. 26). I wonder whether this paradoxical phrasing could be avoided or refined here by mapping these moves along axes of sex and gender, especially because Grange next moves to the maternal body and its biological “naturalness.”

When Margaret bursts out of Rufo the Dragon, this seems “a textbook case of Kristevan abjection” (p. 27) of the maternal body. But when the plurality of Rufo’s many bodies are considered, Grange finds several versions more in keeping with Kristeva’s “Stabat mater” and its semiotic “recovery of the body” (p. 27). Those versions disrupt mimeticism by including both child and mother in their prayers for safe “delivery” (p. 28). Nevertheless, Grange recognizes the force of Judith Butler’s critique of Kristeva’s semiotic maternal body, asking “to what extent ... the disruption ... *empower[s]* women” (p. 29).^[3] Instead the textual renegotiation of Margaret’s and Rufo’s bodies “in the unstable transition ... from one manuscript [or performance] to another” (p. 31) allows us to see the abjection of the maternal body as contingent: “[A] discourse that flags up the process of naturalization instead of naturalizing itself is the precursor to imagining bodies differently” (p. 31). But who can “glimpse” these flags other than the modern medievalist?

As though in response, Grange concludes chapter two, “St George of Cappadocia (and his Dragon): Strangers and Communities,” with an example of a late medieval reader who saw that saint’s multiple bodies. William Caxton, like Grange, found “discrepancies between French, Latin and English recensions of the text” (p. 58). From these, Caxton produced “a saint so universally revered that he can only be the patron of the English” (p. 60). This paradoxical formula goes to the heart of Kristeva’s understanding of medieval Christendom, which comprised “cosmopolitan communities” that “still had entry requirements” (p. 50). Seen across versions of his life and in how they treat abject pagan bodies, George embodies this paradox. Vernacular versions “provide two models of engagement with strangers”: either George “annihilates uncannily familiar strangers” or he “slays abstract strangeness to assimilate alterity” (p. 60). The argument is made more explicit and more strongly here that the philologist can witness how bodies get made through discourse. A philologist’s view of George, a saint “hijacked” by “right-wing movements” (p. 40), can contribute to the most urgent questions of the day involving the welcoming of foreigners and the creation of communities.

Treating the community as a “body of bodies,” Grange remains within the framework of abjection from chapter one, moving that term, as Kristeva does, from psyche to polis. How can a community assimilate the abject body of the foreigner? Or how can a community arise from abject bodies? Drawing on Kristeva’s *Étrangers à nous-même*,^[4] Grange finds a solution in a “community of strangers-to-themselves [that] does not abjectify its fellow men” (p. 55). Although this is seen as a step forward, it does not get far enough out of the head. Grange supplements Kristeva’s work with that of other theorists, in particular Jacques Derrida,^[5] to see whether such a self-strange community can embrace a true stranger who may not take on the same universality or use the same tongue. Bodies from medieval hagiography show how this might be done in two versions of George’s life (Caxton’s and one manuscript of the *Gilte Legende*). In those versions, we find the story of George’s decisive appearance during the First Crusade at Jerusalem where he helps the Franks over the walls. But rather than the slaughter of the city’s people that usually follows, we are given a description of the Chapel of St George near Ramla, which heals both Christians and Muslims: “In the Ramla miracle, then, Caxton’s George does not destroy Saracens, nor does he assimilate them; he lets them join his cultic community and interact with him in their own way (in their own tongue)” (p. 58). Grange provocatively changes our sense of what a *textual* community can be: not just one constructed by the text, but one that has “the intricacy, mobility, relationality, and incompleteness of a text” (p. 61). A beautiful idea expressed beautifully and one that insists on a philologist’s place at the communal table. Grange concludes that “To remedy the very human condition of abjectifying strangers” we should take the philological rather than the psychoanalytic cure (p. 61).

Different versions of a single saint’s life raise the spectre of inaccuracy. In chapter three, “St Honorat of Hungary, Some Saracens, and their Queer Genealogies,” we find Raimon Feraut, the author of an Occitan life of Honorat, accused of “muddy[ing] all temporality and cast[ing] the saint as a Hungarian” (p. 69). The turn here to genealogy is also a turn to queer theory, which has become central to our readings of medieval hagiographical texts. Grange employs variation in such texts across manuscript bodies to intervene in queer theory’s “temporal turn” (p. 71). The queer “like the abject” reveals naturalizing norms but “unlike the abject ... resists by carving out a space (and time) that is liveable, or at least promises to be” (p. 70). The queer thereby furthers the troubling of the Lacanian zone explored in chapters one and two. Grange’s chapters build layer upon layer, and the question of community from chapter two returns here with “Honorat’s queerness” seen “in the multiplicity of spiritual family roles” he plays (p. 74), as well as in Raimon’s “conflation of enemies of the Christian faith from different time-periods [pagans, Manicheans, Muslims, etc.] into a single Saracen” foe (p. 82). The saint’s genealogical queerness is set against the stable genealogies he helps to stabilize, just as Raimon does in writing his now Hungarian life for Maria of Hungary. This is the “conservative conception of medieval hagiography’s queer genealogies” (p. 83) often diagnosed by queer readings. But Grange points to “beneficiaries of Honorat’s thaumaturgical exploits ... who are trickier” to fit into a stable genealogy (p. 75). When it becomes a question of whether some character may imitate Honorat’s queerness, Grange sees “glimpses of vernacular hagiography’s queer potential” (p. 75). These glimpses are available in

those very moments of anachronism, and to treat them merely as errors would be to read saints' lives "anachronistically" (p. 83).

From time to space, Grange's final chapter returns to the Lacanian *zone entre-deux-morts* in treating "St Enimia of France and the Wonders of the Tarn Gorges." Enimia's self-abjection (asking to be infected with leprosy) becomes a willed symbolic death. Again one version troubles this agency with "a lingering suspicion ... that Enimia cannot have asked for leprosy in all innocence" (p. 93). Equally important for Grange's argument is that different versions also entail different geographies: Enimia "does not ... leave the same France and reach the same Gévaudan each time" (p. 94). The troubling of topography allows us to see the distortions of any mapping of the Lacanian zone onto some version of the saint's life. Grange returns to Lacan's example of Antigone and to the debate over her "revolutionary potential" (p. 100). Žižek undermines that potential, but Grange, following Butler, allows instead for a "logic of perversion" (p. 101) at work in versions of the text where the uninhabitable Gévaudan landscape becomes the inhabited site of community. In this way, "the early thirteenth-century Occitan text by Bertran de Marselha" is "like Judith Butler's Antigone" in that it "moves boundaries" (p. 108).

In conclusion Grange turns to the life of Syrus as found in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*. Unusual for this genre, "it comes with a ready-made hermeneutic framework" (p. 112), an explanatory gloss which Grange, following Alain Boureau, explicates along the four lines of medieval exegesis. The tropological level in particular is put forward as troubling one final binary: whether saints are to be emulated or admired. Grange rightly calls attention to how there is "some scope" for both (p. 114). What we might emulate is contingent, and that contingency is afforded by the mutation of saintly and monstrous bodies "in response to shifting religious, genealogical, gender and proto-national identities" (p. 115).

Saints and Monsters is what one would hope for a book of its kind insofar as its sophisticated engagement with theory is everywhere also an engagement with the literary object. I cannot help but think, therefore, that its author is in a position to go one step "meta." Lacanian psychoanalysis has been tremendously productive within the humanities. But that discourse is absent (abjected?) from many departments of scientific psychology (whether clinical or developmental). Sublime and abject bodies may be culturally and textually contingent, but they are also disciplinarily contingent. Perhaps Lacanian discourse is science's abject; perhaps it is our sublime. Such would be an extension of this book that I would like to see. It is already a mirror in which to look anew upon sublime and abject bodies; let us turn it elsewhere. After all, academia has its saints and monsters too.

NOTES

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992).

[2] Sarah Kay, "The sublime body of the martyr: violence in early romance Saints' *Lives*" in Richard W. Kaeuper, ed., *Violence in Medieval Society* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000), 3-20.

[3] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

[4] Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1988). Translated by Leon S. Roudiez as *Strangers to ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[5] Jacques Derrida, *L'autre cap ; suivi de La démocratie ajournée* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991). Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas as *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c1992).

Brian J. Reilly
Fordham University
breilly17@fordham.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172